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The Contribution of the Encyclical *Evangelium vitae* to the Development of Catholic Moral Teaching in the Area of the Ethics of Life

Abstract

John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, published in 1995, is an important document devoted entirely to the issue of the value and respect for human life in the context of contemporary attitudes and advances in medicine. In justifying its positions, the document, addressed to all people of good will, uses not only biblical arguments and those derived from Church tradition, but also draws on rational arguments and convictions that are accessible and recognizable to every person in their conscience. For theology, the encyclical is important in the area of contemporary bioethics and, as such, constitutes a significant contribution to the development of Catholic moral teaching, mainly on the issue of respect for human life. The subject of this text is to present and justify the thesis on the contribution of *Evangelium vitae* to the development of moral teaching. The author does this by using specific examples of positions contained in the papal document. The thesis of this article is most clearly explained by the encyclical's position on the death penalty. Next, the article discusses the contribution made by the papal document in clarifying the distinctions on the issue of euthanasia. Furthermore, the position on the practice of transplants is another detailed aspect in the development of the Catholic moral message on the issue of human life. Finally, the issue of political ethics raised, which is a consequence of the positions contained in *Evangelium vitae*, to the development of which the encyclical also contributed. Reflections on selected aspects of the document, which contributed to the development of the Church's teaching on morality, do not exhaust or conclude research on this subject.

Keywords: *Evangelium vitae*, development of moral teaching, bioethics, capital punishment, euthanasia, suicide, transplantology, political ethics in matters of life.

Wkład encykliki *Evangelium vitae* w rozwój katolickiego nauczania moralnego w obszarze etyki życia

Streszczenie

Encyklika *Evangelium vitae* Jana Pawła II, opublikowana w 1995 r., jest ważnym dokumentem w całości poświęconym problematyce wartości i poszanowania życia ludzkiego w kontekście ówczesnych stanowisk i postaw oraz postępu w medycynie. W uzasadnieniu swoich stanowisk dokument skierowany do wszystkich ludzi dobrej woli posługuje się nie tylko argumentacją biblijną i wywodzącą się z tradycji Kościoła, ale sięga do racji rozumowych i przekonań, które dostępne są i możliwe do rozpoznania każdemu człowiekowi w sumieniu. Encyklika zawiera ważne treści w obszarze współczesnej bioetyki i jako taka stanowi istotny wkład w rozwój katolickiego nauczania moralnego, głównie w kwestii problematyki poszanowania

życia ludzkiego. Przedmiotem niniejszego tekstu jest prezentacja i uzasadnienie tezy o wkładzie *Evangelium vitae* w rozwój nauczania moralnego. Autor dokonał tego posługując się konkretnymi, wybranymi przykładami stanowisk zawartych w papieskim dokumencie. Najbardziej ewidentnie tezę niniejszego artykułu wyjaśnia stanowisko encykliki wobec kary śmierci. W dalszej kolejności jest mowa o wkładzie papieskiego dokumentu do nauczania moralnego przez wyjaśnienie rozróżnień w kwestii eutanazji. Ponadto stanowisko wobec praktyki przeszczepów jest kolejnym szczegółowym aspektem na drodze rozwoju katolickiego przesłania moralnego w kwestii ludzkiego życia. Na koniec został przedstawiony problem etyki polityki, będący konsekwencją stanowisk zawartych w *Evangelium vitae*, do rozwoju którego również przyczyniła się encyklika. Refleksje na temat wybranych aspektów dokumentu, który przyczynił się do rozwoju nauczania Kościoła w kwestiach moralności, nie wyczerpują ani nie zamykają badań na ten temat.

Słowa kluczowe: *Evangelium vitae*, rozwój nauczania moralnego, bioetyka, kara śmierci, eutanazja, samobójstwo, transplantologia, etyka polityki w kwestiach życia.

Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium vitae* has been, and continues to be, the subject of numerous studies and conferences, during which the positions and content it presents regarding the understanding of the human person, the respect for human life, human rights, as well as contemporary social, political, legal, cultural, philosophical, and theological issues concerning human life, are discussed. The document is exceptional primarily because it offers a comprehensive and relatively complete presentation of the Church's teaching on the value and inviolability of human life and the necessity of respecting it, set against the backdrop of contemporary trends, attitudes toward life, and the various possibilities of intervention at different stages of its development.

Although this document on the sanctity of human life is theological in nature and employs biblical argumentation as well as references to the Church's tradition and the deposit of Christian faith, its message is addressed to all people of good will. The content it contains appeals to a moral sensitivity accessible to all people, believers and non-believers alike, enabling everyone to recognize the message about the sanctity and inviolability of human life by reading the natural law in their conscience¹. Stanisław Nagy, drawing attention to the exceptional significance of the teaching contained in the papal document, stated that

(...) the encyclical *Evangelium vitae* has become a forum in which the Pope has truly "confirmed" and forcefully proclaimed that the truth about the inviolability of innocent human life at every stage of its existence, as well as the fact that its violation always constitutes a profound moral evil, is an article of faith belong-

¹ Andrzej Szostek. 1997. Filozofia życia w „Ewangelii życia”. In *Jan Paweł II. Evangelium vitae. Tekst i komentarze*. Ed. Tadeusz Styczeń, Janusz Nagórny, 167–168. Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL.

ing to the deposit of Revelation and, as such, must be accepted by an act of divine faith².

Joseph Ratzinger, for his part, during the presentation of the encyclical, emphasized the doctrinal character of its third chapter, which sets forth the Church's teaching of faith, indicating the direction for the Church's pastoral activity by defining the meaning of the fifth commandment in the context of the Christian message, discussing the concrete moral imperatives that arise from it, and showing their consequences in the field of political ethics³.

Regardless of the document's significance and the richness and continuing relevance of its content thirty years after its publication, the encyclical *Evangelium vitae* has contributed to the development of the Church's teaching on the value of life and the requirement to respect it – an essential element of the Christian moral message, the explanation of which is the subject of this article. The contribution of this papal document on the value and inviolability of human life to the development of the Church's teaching on this subject is linked not only to its comprehensive treatment of the issue of life in dialogue with contemporary concepts and cultural trends, or to its references to the findings, achievements, and possibilities of the biological and medical sciences, but also to its clear affirmation of the Church's stance on certain specific issues. The relevance of *Evangelium vitae* to the development of the Church's teaching on respect for life is clearly demonstrated by its position on the death penalty, euthanasia, and the matter of organ transplantation, as well as in the area of political ethics concerning the protection of human life.

In justifying the thesis of this article, the discussion is limited to selected issues, drawing on both the text of the encyclical and its commentaries. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of the chosen specific issues, but rather to show how the stance expressed in the papal document has contributed to the development of the Church's teaching on the value of human life and the respect due to it – an essential element of Christian moral teaching.

² Stanisław Nagy. 1997. Problem stopnia teologicznej pewności nauki encykliki *Evangelium vitae*. In *Jan Paweł II. Evangelium vitae. Tekst i komentarze*. Ed. Tadeusz Styczeń, Janusz Nagórny, 244. Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL.

³ Joseph Ratzinger. 1995. „Nienaruszalność życia ludzkiego w świetle encykliki 'Evangelium vitae'". *L'Osservatore Romano* (Polish edition) 16 (5) : 48.

1. The issue of the (non)permissibility of the death penalty

The most evident confirmation of the contribution of the encyclical *Evangelium vitae* to the development of the Church's moral teaching can be found in the passages concerning the death penalty. The previous position on this issue, expressed in the 1993 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in continuity with tradition, allowed for the use of capital punishment within the framework of the right to legitimate defense exercised by the state, as a means of restoring the disrupted social order and protecting others (CCC 2266). Although the Catechism's position acknowledged the permissibility of the death penalty, it also proposed the use of bloodless means for protecting human life and public order from aggressors, as methods more consistent with the requirements of the common good and human dignity (CCC 2267), this stance was met with criticism.

Theological and legal circles pointed out that the death penalty is incompatible with human dignity because it undermines the treatment of the human being as a subject responsible for his actions. A punishment that takes the form of taking a life is not an expression of respect for the person's subjectivity but rather the annihilation of his existence and a negation of his intrinsic purpose. The argument of legitimate defense, when applied to the death penalty, is meaningless, because it requires proving that there are no other means of protecting society from criminals; moreover, the issue at stake is the punishment of a person who has been tried and imprisoned after a lengthy judicial process. Doubts about the Catechism's position also arise from its emphasis on punishment as the restoration of the disrupted order, which pushes to the background the interests of victims and perpetrators as well as the question of their responsibility⁴.

According to Eberhard Schockenhoff, tradition wrongly classified the death penalty as an exception to the prohibition of killing. Since taking a human life is morally wrong because it deprives a person of the respect owed to him as a moral subject, the admissibility of taking the life of a criminal within the framework of a state legal order is incomprehensible. In such cases, the fundamental requirement for acting in a situation of legitimate defense – namely, self-love – is absent.

⁴ Günther Virt. 1996. Todesstrafe wieder aktuell? Eine theologisch-ethische Besinnung angesichts der jüngsten Äußerungen des kirchlichen Lehramts. In *Ad libertatem in veritate. Księga pamiątkowa dedykowana księdzu profesorowi Alojzemu Marcolowi w 65. rocznicę urodzin i 35-lecie pracy naukowej*. Ed. Piotr Morciniec, 330–332. Opole: Wydział Teologiczny Uniwersytetu Opolskiego; Alexander Hollerbach. 2000. Todesstrafe. In *Lexikon der Bioethik*. Vol. 3. Ed. Wilhelm Korff, Lutwin Beck, Paul Mikat, 586. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus; Piotr Nitecki. 1995. Problematyka kary śmierci w świetle encykliki „*Evangelium vitae*”. In *Życie – dar nienaruszalny. Wokół encykliki Evangelium vitae*. Ed. Antoni Młotek, Tadeusz Reroń, 190. Wrocław: Papieski Fakultet Teologiczny.

Moreover, society possesses other means of protection against crime, and the perpetrator, through the crimes committed, has not lost his right to life and should be treated as a moral subject with inherent dignity. A state governed by the rule of law is not authorized to deprive a criminal of the possibility of moral improvement; rather, it should support him in this through appropriate measures⁵.

The principle according to which even a criminal does not lose personal dignity was expressed by John Paul II in the encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, where he refers to the biblical account of fratricide. In the document we read:

Not even a murderer loses his personal dignity, and God himself pledges to guarantee this. And it is precisely here that the paradoxical mystery of the merciful justice of God is shown forth. As Saint Ambrose writes: "Once the crime is admitted at the very inception of this sinful act of parricide, then the divine law of God's mercy should be immediately extended. If punishment is forthwith inflicted on the accused, then men in the exercise of justice would in no way observe patience and moderation, but would straightaway condemn the defendant to punishment. (...) God drove Cain out of his presence and sent him into exile far away from his native land, so that he passed from a life of human kindness to one which was more akin to the rude existence of a wild beast. God, who preferred the correction rather than the death of a sinner, did not desire that a homicide be punished by the exaction of another act of homicide"⁶.

Another passage of the papal document presents a clear shift in the Church's position on the death penalty. John Paul II, writing about legitimate defense, stated that the issue of the highest form of punishment should be approached from a penal perspective that is more consistent with human dignity and, ultimately, with God's plans for the individual and society. The extent and type of punishment should be carefully evaluated and should not reach the highest measure – that is, taking the life of the criminal – except in cases of absolute necessity, meaning when no other means of protecting society are available. "Today however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent"⁷.

The above formulations from *Evangelium vitae* were incorporated into the revised text on the death penalty in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, serving as an ex-

⁵ Eberhard Schockenhoff. 2009. *Ethik des Lebens. Grundlagen und neue Herausforderungen*. Freiburg – Basel – Wien: Herder, 267.

⁶ John Paul II. 1995. *Encyclical Evangelium vitae*. Vatican: LEV 1995 (further: EV), 9.

⁷ EV 56.

ample of the development of Church teaching in moral matters. The position on the death penalty demonstrates that this issue belongs to norms that are not timeless, immutable, or fixed, but rather to norms that must be developed and interpreted in the context of specific circumstances⁸. Regarding the death penalty, John Paul II's encyclical was not the only document that contributed to the development of the Church's moral teaching. Another document that represents a further step in the development of Church teaching and the change in its position on the death penalty is Pope Francis's encyclical *Fratelli tutti*. In reference to *Evangelium vitae* and the inviolable dignity of every human being, the Pope stated that the abolition of the death penalty serves as confirmation of this, because

(...) If I do not deny that dignity to the worst of criminals, I will not deny it to anyone. I will give everyone the possibility of sharing this planet with me, despite all our differences⁹.

The encyclical *Evangelium vitae* undoubtedly contributed to the development of the Church's teaching on the death penalty, doing so in reference to traditional arguments that appeal to the legitimate defense of the common good – a defense that today can be achieved without resorting to the highest form of punishment. Another traditional argument concerning the death penalty refers to St. Thomas Aquinas and his position, according to which a person, as part of a whole, who commits a crime deprives himself of his dignity and descends to the level of animals, thereby excluding himself from the moral organism that the state is obligated to protect by imposing the death penalty. However, because human dignity is inviolable and human life is sacred, as emphasized in *Evangelium vitae*, the change of position and the categorical rejection of the death penalty cannot be limited to pragmatic justification, such as the protection of society. It must also be grounded in the above reasons and the conviction that a human being, while part of the larger moral organism, is himself an irreplaceable whole and can never be treated merely as a means to an end, but always as an end in himself¹⁰. There are numerous serious reasons against the death penalty, among which a particularly important one is the conviction that by respecting the inviolability of a criminal's life, society distances itself from dangerous utilitarian approaches to life and ultimately bears witness

⁸ Virt. 1996. Todesstrafe wieder aktuell?, 332.

⁹ Francis. 2020. *Encyclical Fratelli tutti*. Vatican: LEV, 269.

¹⁰ Schockenhoff. 2009. *Ethik des Lebens*, 267–268. Nitecki. 1995. Problematyka kary śmierci w świetle encykliki „*Evangelium vitae*“, 189–190.

to its sanctity, the protection of which has been entrusted to it¹¹. This conviction is consistent with the message of *Evangelium vitae* regarding the sanctity of human life and human dignity, which remains inviolable even in the case of those who have committed serious crimes.

2. The development of distinctions in the evaluation of euthanasia practices

Another example confirming the development of the Church's teaching on bioethical issues in *Evangelium vitae* is the problem of euthanasia. In presenting this matter, the Pope, referring to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's document *Iura et bona*, affirms the importance of necessary distinctions and cites the definition of euthanasia, describing it as "(...) an action or an omission which of itself or by intention causes death, in order that all suffering may in this way be eliminated"¹². An important distinction, complementing this definition, is the statement that euthanasia should be considered in the context of intention and the methods employed. The encyclical contributes to the development of the Church's teaching on dying and death by clarifying the issue of forgoing extraordinary or disproportionate treatment. This refers to the use of medical procedures that are inadequate to the patient's condition, disproportionate to the expected outcomes, or excessively burdensome for the patient or, alternatively, for the family. The decision to refrain from such forms of treatment in the face of imminent and unavoidable death can be made in accordance with conscience and does not constitute an immoral act of euthanasia¹³.

A further clarification of the above position in *Evangelium vitae* is the paragraph concerning palliative therapies, which can be seen as a specification of important distinctions in understanding euthanasia and as another aspect of the development of the Church's teaching on respect for life, absent in earlier documents. The encyclical explains that these therapies aim to alleviate suffering in the final stages of illness through the use of pain-relieving and sedative measures, including those whose use carries a risk of shortening life. John Paul II emphasized that the use of such pain-relieving measures, even with the risk of death, does not imply an intention to cause or seek death, but only its permissible side effect. Further-

¹¹ Hollerbach. 2000. Todesstrafe, 587.

¹² EV 65; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. 1980. *Declaration on Euthanasia Iura et Bona*. Vatican: LEV (further: IeB), II.

¹³ EV 65; Józef Wróbel. 1999. *Człowiek i medycyna. Teologicznomoralne podstawy ingerencji medycznych*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Księży Sercanów, 418, 422–428.

more, the voluntary acceptance of suffering and the refusal of palliative therapies can allow a conscious participation in the Passion of Christ, although not everyone is called to this kind of heroic act¹⁴. Only after making these important distinctions does John Paul II's document clearly articulate the moral evaluation, according to which "(...) euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person"¹⁵. The above distinctions clarify the essence of euthanasia, provide the basis for the ethical evaluation of the propriety or immorality of therapeutic methods used in the face of dying, and demonstrate the realistic, open, and medically informed stance of the encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, which makes a significant contribution to the development of the Church's teaching on human life.

Originally, in the Church's teaching on euthanasia, dying, and death, there was a distinction between ordinary and extraordinary means. In the early stages of modern medicine, this distinction seemed helpful, but it has lost its significance. Due to medical progress and the possibilities offered by innovative therapeutic methods, in many cases the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary means became meaningless. While initially modern methods involved an extraordinarily high expenditure of resources, they quickly became standard practices. In response to medical advancements, the Church's teaching abandoned the use of the ordinary/extraordinary distinction and replaced it with the distinction between proportionate and disproportionate means, which was articulated in *Evangelium vitae* and earlier in the document *Iura et bona*¹⁶. In the encyclical, John Paul II, writing about the moral obligation to seek treatment and undergo therapy, stated that one should

(...) be determined whether the means of treatment available are objectively proportionate to the prospects for improvement. To forego extraordinary or disproportionate means is not the equivalent of suicide or euthanasia; it rather expresses acceptance of the human condition in the face of death¹⁷.

The shift from distinguishing ordinary and extraordinary means to proportionate and disproportionate means is not merely a matter of terminology. The distinction between ordinary and extraordinary means primarily considers external factors related to medical services, such as the state of therapeutic techniques, availability,

¹⁴ EV 65.

¹⁵ EV 65.

¹⁶ Schockenhoff. 2009. *Ethik des Lebens*, 387.

¹⁷ EV 65.

and regional or geographic conditions. In contrast, the criterion for distinguishing proportionate and disproportionate means is the relationship between the therapeutic goal and the measures employed, addressing whether intensive medical interventions – such as continued artificial respiration or nutrition – are appropriate for achieving the physician’s intended purpose under given circumstances. If medical measures are counterproductive with respect to the intended goal, cannot achieve that primary goal, or hinder it, the moral obligation to use them becomes void, regardless of the resources expended. Even ordinary means, included in the regular spectrum of intensive care and readily available, may become disproportionate if they are unsuitable for achieving the primary therapeutic goal or impose an unreasonable burden on the patient. The proportionality of therapeutic measures can be further specified using three criteria: rationality, necessity, and suitability in achieving the intended outcome¹⁸.

Another important distinction highlighted in *Evangelium vitae*, which underscores the significance of this document for the development of the Church’s teaching on the respect and protection of human life, concerns the circumstances in which euthanasia is carried out, which can take the form of either suicide or homicide. Of particular importance for the development of Church teaching is the stance on suicide, which in the Church’s tradition has been unequivocally condemned as a morally grave act. A clarification of the Church’s position on suicide is already provided in the document *Iura et bona*, according to which it is

(...) a refusal of love for self, the denial of a natural instinct to live, a flight from the duties of justice and charity owed to one’s neighbor, to various communities or to the whole of society – although, as is generally recognized, at times there are psychological factors present that can diminish responsibility or even completely remove it¹⁹.

The encyclical *Evangelium vitae* clarified the Church’s position on suicide by explicitly distinguishing between the objective moral assessment of the act itself and the cultural, psychological, and social circumstances that affect the subjective responsibility of the person performing the act. The document states:

Even though a certain psychological, cultural and social conditioning may induce a person to carry out an action which so radically contradicts the innate inclina-

¹⁸ Schockenhoff. 2009. *Ethik des Lebens*, 387–388; Stefan Ernst. 2007. „Verhältnismäßige und unverhältnismäßige Mittel. Eine bedenkenswerte Unterscheidung in der lehramtlichen Bewertung der Sterbehilfe“. *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 58 : 44–45.

¹⁹ IeB I.

tion to life, thus lessening or removing subjective responsibility, suicide, when viewed objectively, is a gravely immoral act. In fact, it involves the rejection of love of self and the renunciation of the obligation of justice and charity towards one's neighbor, towards the communities to which one belongs, and towards society as a whole²⁰.

The distinction presented in the papal document highlights the importance of sociology and the human sciences for theological reflection and the formulation of moral judgments, contributing to new pastoral approaches and proposals regarding the perception and burial of those who have taken their own lives. Meanwhile, "assisted suicide," discussed in the section of the encyclical on euthanasia, raises the issue of direct or indirect cooperation or omission of actions, as well as questions of responsibility and guilt, not only in the context of euthanasia but also in other cases of self-inflicted death²¹.

3. Organ donation as an expression of self-giving

The second half of the 20th century marked a period of significant progress in the field of transplantation medicine. Although the *Evangelium vitae* encyclical does not include a specific section dedicated to this topic, it contains several statements on this important issue in contemporary bioethics, which contribute to the development of the Catholic Church's teaching on human organ transplantation. In the part of the document devoted to proclaiming the Gospel of Life, John Paul II, writing about heroic gestures – expressions of total self-giving and manifestations of the greatest love, such as giving one's life for a beloved person (Jn 15:13), participation in the mystery of the Cross, and acts of selflessness that strengthen the culture of life and deserve special recognition – mentioned "(...) donation of organs, performed in an ethically acceptable manner, with a view to offering a chance of health and even of life itself to the sick who sometimes have no other hope"²². Organ donation is presented from a personalist perspective, in which the leading category is selfless love understood as a gift of oneself.

²⁰ EV 66.

²¹ Tadeusz Reroń. 1995. Samobójstwo w ocenie moralności chrześcijańskiej. In *Życie – dar nie-naruszalny. Wokół encykliki Evangelium vitae*. Ed. Antoni Młotek, Tadeusz Reroń, 210–216. Wrocław: Papieski fakultet Teologiczny.

²² EV 86.

The few statements contained in the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* regarding organ transplants constitute an expansion of the Catholic Church's position on the subject at the time and have been recognized as foundations and determinants of ethical and theological-moral reflection. These include both negative premises, pointing to the threats and dangers associated with anthropological reductionism, dominated by a materialistic-biological vision of humanity, and positive premises. The document also contains significant positive premises by emphasizing the role of love and solidarity in interpersonal relationships, as manifested by the donation of one's own organs for transplantation. Such an attitude serves as a testimony that validates the Christian message and embodies the service of life²³.

Although the encyclical does not provide detailed ethical requirements for the practice of organ and tissue transplantation, it mentions two requirements formulated in the form of prohibitions. The first concerns the practice of using human embryos and fetuses as "biological material" for use or as a source of organs or tissues for transplantation to treat certain diseases. In such a case, it involves the killing of innocent human beings, and even if it benefits others, it constitutes an absolutely impermissible act²⁴.

Transplantation is also mentioned in the section of the encyclical discussing the temptation of euthanasia, that is, the "attempt to dominate death by causing it prematurely". The context that fosters such practices is the possibilities offered by medicine, in which

By using highly sophisticated systems and equipment, science and medical practice today are able not only to attend to cases formerly considered untreatable and to reduce or eliminate pain, but also to sustain and prolong life even in situations of extreme frailty, to resuscitate artificially patients whose basic biological functions have undergone sudden collapse, and to use special procedures to make organs available for transplanting²⁵.

The Pope does not question or criticize the possibilities offered by modern transplantation, but he warns against morally reprehensible actions that could be undertaken in this context.

In the context of risks associated with euthanasia, one of the most significant ethical issues and requirements in transplantation is the determination of the crite-

²³ Wróbel. 1999. *Człowiek i medycyna*, 320–321.

²⁴ EV 63.

²⁵ EV 64.

tion of death. Today, this criterion is brain death, since a human's personal identity is linked to the brain, which simultaneously guarantees the organism as a unity of body and spirit. The criterion of brain death was referenced by Pope John Paul II in a 1990 address to participants of the Congress of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, where he stated that death occurs when the spiritual principle ensuring the unity of the organism can no longer perform its functions in and for it, and the elements of the body left to themselves cease to exist. Although John Paul II addressed this issue several years before the publication of *Evangelium vitae*, it was not mentioned in the encyclical, perhaps because it remained a subject of scientific discussion and was not yet universally accepted. The acceptance of brain death as the criterion of human death seems to be confirmed by Pope Benedict XVI in 2008, who emphasized the importance of precisely determining the moment of death as a prerequisite for organ transplantation²⁶. The encyclical *Evangelium vitae* does not contain statements on this then-currently debated topic, but it fundamentally evaluates the practice of organ donation positively from the perspective of the category of self-giving, which constitutes its contribution to the development of the Church's teaching on this subject.

4. Elements of Political Ethics Concerning Life

Alongside its contribution to the development of the Church's teaching on specific bioethical issues, in the section addressing the relationship between civil law and moral law, the document provides guidance for a political ethics oriented towards the protection and respect of human life. In this respect as well, the papal document represents a development of the Church's teaching in response to new problems and challenges²⁷.

John Paul II opposed the widely held view that the legal order of society should be limited to preserving and codifying the convictions of the majority. It is often argued that since truth, as such, is not accessible to everyone, the only criterion a politician can follow is the decision of the majority. Consequently, practical

²⁶ Schockenhoff. 2009. *Ethik des Lebens*, 415–417; Carlo Golser. 1996. Dyskusja wokół śmierci mózgowej. Z perspektywy katolickiego teologa-moralisty. In *Etyczne aspekty transplantacji narządów. Materiały z sympozjum w Kamieniu Śląskim w dniach 15.-16.04.1996*. Ed. Alojzy Marcol, 39–55. Opole: Wydział Teologiczny Uniwersytetu Opolskiego; Wróbel. 1999. *Człowiek i medycyna*, 94–95.

²⁷ Giovanni B. Sala. 1997. Ciągłość i nowość w nauczaniu *Evangelium vitae*. In *Jan Paweł II. Evangelium vitae. Tekst i komentarze*. Ed. Tadeusz Styczeń, Janusz Nagórny, 304. Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL.

relativism is said to guarantee freedom and tolerance, while adherence to objective moral norms leads to authoritarianism and intolerance. *Evangelium vitae* exposes the internal inconsistency of such views, which inevitably result in the crisis and destruction of democracy. This inconsistency primarily concerns the concept of conscience: while private individuals claim moral autonomy for themselves, politicians are instructed to set aside the convictions of their own conscience and conform to the majority opinion. Furthermore, it is suggested that the democratic process of lawmaking should yield to compromise aimed at balancing conflicting interests, among which the law of the stronger often prevails. In John Paul II's view, unconditional reliance on the majority principle, if not grounded in a moral criterion binding on all, can easily lead to tyranny. Democracy should not be overestimated nor treated as a substitute for morality. As a moral institution of society, democracy must be founded on fundamental values: the dignity of every human person, respect for their inviolable and inalienable rights, and recognition of the common good as the guiding criterion of political life²⁸.

From these fundamental requirements expected of a democratic rule of law, the *Evangelium vitae* encyclical derives practical consequences regarding enacted legislation. The first of these is the statement concerning laws that contradict basic moral values: such laws do not establish justice but rather inflict injustice, lack the character of true law, and therefore no one is obliged to obey them; indeed, conscientious opposition to them is required. In this context, the encyclical refers to a moral minimum whereby the state must guarantee that individuals engaged in healthcare services have the right to conscientious objection – that is, the right to refuse participation in planning, preparing, or performing acts aimed against human life²⁹. In the document, we read: “Those who have recourse to conscientious objection must be protected not only from legal penalties but also from any negative effects on the legal, disciplinary, financial and professional plane”³⁰.

The encyclical *Evangelium vitae* also addresses a widely discussed issue in the ethics of politics concerning the conduct of a legislator guided by Christian faith and its fundamental values, in a situation where it is possible to improve an unjust abortion law but it is impossible to secure a sufficient majority to introduce a total ban on the taking of unborn life. The dilemma concerns whether the legislator, re-

²⁸ EV 69–70; Ratzinger. 1995. Nienaruszalność życia ludzkiego w świetle encykliki „*Evangelium vitae*”, 50; Alicja Grześkowiak. 1997. Polityka i prawo w służbie życia według encykliki *Evangelium vitae* Jana Pawła II. In *Jan Paweł II. Evangelium vitae. Tekst i komentarze*. Ed. Tadeusz Styczeń, Janusz Nagórny, 354–356. Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL.

²⁹ Ratzinger. 1995. Nienaruszalność życia ludzkiego w świetle encykliki „*Evangelium vitae*”, 50.

³⁰ EV 74.

maintaining faithful to their conscience, should reject an improved yet still unjust law, or support a compromise solution. John Paul II advocated supporting a law that mitigates the harmful effects of existing regulations and reduces their negative consequences, provided there is no doubt about the legislator's absolute opposition to abortion and that this opposition has been publicly expressed. Such a stance does not constitute illicit cooperation in the enactment of an unjust law but is a legitimate and morally upright attempt to limit its harmful aspects³¹. This specific issue concerns an important principle in moral theology regarding participation in evil acts, which John Paul II understood within the broader context of complex social problems that cannot be resolved without seeking the most optimal solutions. This resolution was later reiterated in the document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of the Church's Teaching on the Participation of Catholics in Political Life* (2002)³².

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This text presents only selected and most evident threads of the *Evangelium vitae* encyclical, highlighting its contribution to the development of the Church's teaching on respect for human life and the requirements for its protection. The fundamental message of the document regarding the value and sanctity of human life is timeless and represents a significant contribution to the development of Catholic moral teaching in this area. The content of the document was formulated with reference to the Church's position at the time, as well as from the perspective of the contemporary state of medicine, social sciences, and cultural studies. Many of its passages are cited in later Church documents and continue to inspire new reflections and interpretations in light of medical progress.

The contribution of the document to the development of moral teaching on the value and respect for human life lies not only in its clear articulation of positions, as exemplified by the issue of the death penalty, but also in the careful expression of opinions on matters that are still the subject of research and debate, as illustrated by its stance on organ transplantation.

³¹ EV 73; Ratzinger. 1995. Nienaruszalność życia ludzkiego w świetle encykliki „*Evangelium vitae*”, 50; Grzeškowiak. 1997. Polityka i prawo w służbie życia według encykliki *Evangelium vitae* Jana Pawła II, 356–357.

³² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. 2002. *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*. Vatican: LEV, 4.

One cannot disagree with the view of Cardinal J. Ratzinger, who, during the presentation of the document in 1995, emphasized the seriousness and grandeur of its message, stating:

In the encyclical, the Pope appears as a great teacher not only of the Christian community but of all humanity, at a moment when a new moral awakening is needed to confront the growing tide of violence and human degradation. In the face of this text, one cannot resort to formalistic discussions about the circumstances of its creation or the authority behind its teaching. The text speaks through the richness of its content, its depth, and its breadth of vision. It addresses problems that concern us all and from which none of us can escape³³.

The reflections presented in this article do not exhaust the issue of *Evangelium vitae*'s contribution to the development of Catholic moral teaching, but they serve as an inspiration for further research on these matters.

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³³ Ratzinger. 1995. Nienaruszalność życia ludzkiego w świetle encykliki „*Evangelium vitae*”, 50–51.

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